

ARTICLE APPEARED
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PART I

LOS ANGELES TIMES
19 September 1985

U.S. Cleric Weir Freed in Lebanon

Minister Kidnaped 16 Months Ago; Six Others Still Held

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WASHINGTON—The Rev. Benjamin Weir, the 61-year-old Presbyterian minister kidnaped near his apartment in Beirut 16 months ago, was freed by his captors last weekend, it was disclosed Wednesday, but his release was kept a tight secret because U.S. officials hoped that freedom was imminent for six other Americans held in Lebanon.

The first word that Weir was safe in Norfolk, Va., and in seclusion with his family came from Presbyterian Church officials and was confirmed shortly afterward by President Reagan at the conclusion of a speech in Concord, N.H.

White House and State Department officials refused to publicly discuss any of the specifics of Weir's release or what had led the United States to believe that the other American captives might also be freed.

Not Tortured

An unidentified State Department official told the Associated Press, however, that Weir said he had been held in Lebanon throughout his captivity and had not been tortured.

"I'm happy for him and his family," Reagan said to a crowd outside the New Hampshire state Capitol, "but I will not be satisfied and will not cease our efforts until all the hostages—the other six—are released."

Reagan's comments reflected both the Administration's happiness over Weir's liberation and sharp disappointment that hopes for the others' release had been dashed.

Weir, who had lived in Beirut for more than three decades at the time he was abducted by gunmen on May 8, 1984, was reported to be in good mental and physical health and is expected to appear at a news

conference in Washington today.

Families of the six remaining captives, cheered by Weir's freedom, are scheduled to meet with Vice President George Bush on Friday to discuss Administration efforts to gain release of those American captives.

CBS News reported Wednesday that, according to an intelligence source, Weir was released for the purpose of delivering a message to U.S. officials, laying out conditions for the release of the other Americans. The report could not be confirmed.

The Administration has been under steadily mounting pressure to help the remaining hostages since the Beirut hijacking of a TWA jetliner in June and the freeing of 89 captives from that plane after long, delicate negotiations and the intercession of Syrian President Hafez Assad.

Rumors of Weir's release had circulated since Sunday, when a caller, identifying himself as a member of the extremist group Islamic Jihad, told the offices of Western news agencies in Beirut that the American clergyman had been freed.

Early in the week, White House

officials repeatedly said they could not confirm the report, and at Reagan's news conference Wednesday night, he was not asked about the captives.

En route to New Hampshire on Wednesday, the President spoke with Weir by telephone for about five minutes, promising him that the Administration will continue its efforts until all of the remaining six are free.

According to White House spokesman Edward P. Djerejian, the Administration had hopes until late Tuesday that the other hostages might be released along with Weir.

"We kept his liberation secret because we were concerned that making it public would interfere with what we hoped would be the release of the remaining six hostages," he told reporters in New Hampshire. "That is the basic reason why we have kept that information secret until now."

"We haven't given up hope for the release of the others, but it has become apparent that the other hostages are not going to be released in direct connection with the release of the Rev. Weir. We are working to have them released as soon as possible."

Administration hopes had brightened since Sept. 10 with Israel's freeing of the final 119 Lebanese and Palestinian detainees held at Atlit prison camp. They were the last of more than 700 prisoners whose freedom had been demanded by the hijackers of TWA Flight 847 last June.

Although the Administration contended that it had not bargained with the hijackers, it was understood that the Atlit inmates' release would come in the wake of the TWA hostages' freeing.

Djerejian said Wednesday that while there was no linkage between release of the U.S. hostages and the Lebanese prisoners in Israel, the United States still hopes that Israel's freeing of the last group at Atlit will improve the prospect for obtaining the release of the remaining American captives.

"We have hoped that repatriation of the Atlit prisoners would improve the atmosphere in the region," Djerejian said. "We, therefore, intensified our efforts when the Atlit release occurred."

Relatives of some of the remaining captives said Wednesday that they had been aware of stepped-up activity and believed that the Ad-

ministration had established some contact with the captors about three weeks ago.

They said the State Department had asked them to write letters to their missing kin, indicating that the letters would be delivered through intermediaries. There had been no inkling, however, that Weir or any of the others might be released imminently.

Officials maintained that in securing Weir's freedom, the United States had not deviated from its policy of refusing to negotiate with terrorists. "I can assure you," Djerjian said, "that no deal was made and that our position on no concessions to terrorists has not changed."

Other Administration officials said they believe that all six remaining captives are alive; but uncertainty remains about the identity of their captors.

Among the main suspects are Hezbollah (the Party of God), a radical religious movement with ties to the Iranian fundamentalist regime, and Islamic Amal, an extremist offshoot of the Amal militia of Shia Muslim leader Nabih Berri, a major Lebanese politician who was a central figure in the drama that led to the release of the TWA

hostages.

Rep. George M. O'Brien (R-Ill.), who traveled to Syria last month to appeal to President Assad for help, said Wednesday that he believes the remaining Americans are all being held separately and probably by different factions, including some Iranians.

Robert C. McFarlane, President Reagan's national security adviser, told a newspaper publishers' meeting in Colorado that there was "fairly keen" competition among Lebanese factions for custody of the hostages. Weir's release "could intensify that competition and make more difficult the release of the others," he said.

Since the release of the TWA hostages, the Administration has continued efforts to enlist the help of Syria and Iran in obtaining the freedom of the remaining six. Administration officials have continued to say in public that they believe Assad has the ability to influence the situation.

But State Department officials said the Syrians became annoyed with the United States after the TWA hostage crisis was settled because they expected Israel to promptly release the 700 Lebanese and Palestinian camp inmates at

Atlit. Instead, the captives were released a few at a time, the final contingent going home to Lebanon only Sept. 10.

Because the process was dragged out by the Israelis, the officials said, Assad felt that he was robbed of an opportunity to capitalize on his role in settling the crisis.

One American hostage, television reporter Jeremy Levin, escaped from his kidnappers last February. The six remaining captives are:

—William Buckley, 53, a U.S. Embassy political officer kidnapped March 16, 1984.

—Peter Kilburn, 60, a historian at the American University of Beirut, taken Dec. 3, 1984.

—Father Lawrence Jence, 58, a priest who was head of Catholic Relief Services in Beirut, abducted Jan. 8, 1985.

—Terry A. Anderson, 37, Beirut bureau manager for the Associated Press, kidnapped March 16, 1984.

—David P. Jacobsen, 54, director of the American University Hospital, kidnapped May 28, 1985.

—Thomas Sutherland, 53, dean of agriculture at American University, taken June 9, 1985.

Four Frenchmen and one Briton have also been abducted.